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### Child (Sexual) Abuse: A Universal Problem, and Sri Lanka Is No Exception

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## *RESPONSE TO COMMENTARY*

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### Child (Sexual) Abuse: A Universal Problem, and Sri Lanka Is No Exception

Francien Lamers-Winkelmann

**KEYWORDS.** Child sexual abuse, poverty, lack of knowledge, child prostitution, social class, lack of co-operation

Recently in the Netherlands, a 4-year-old Dutch girl named Rowena died as the result of the abuse of her stepfather. He butchered the dead child, and dropped the body parts in different parts of the country. Her trunk was found first in a lake; some time later, her head was discovered approximately 200 kilometers away. Following Rowena's disappearance, her mother, stepfather, and her little sister moved to Spain. Not a single person reported the child as missing: not the school authorities, not the biological father, not her family, and not the neighbours. No reports were made, and no actions were undertaken. It was only when her head was found and authorities reconstructed and broadcast the image of the little girl on television that some people recognized the little girl.

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Rowena's mother and stepfather were subsequently arrested in Spain and brought back to the Netherlands.

Although this case has led to some attention in the media, the amount of attention is slight compared to that given to several cases of so called 'meaningless violence' that occurred in public places in the Netherlands two to three years ago. In a relatively short time, four young adults died as a result of violence by the hands (and feet) of other young adults. In response, action groups were formed, silent marches were held, and remembrance plaquettes were placed at the crime scenes. The Dutch Prime Minister and several other Dutch politicians participated in the silent marches, next to the parents of the victims. Statements by officials were made on television, in Parliament, and in other official and less official places.

Poor Rowena. The Dutch Prime Minister quite possibly does not know that she existed. None of the other Dutch politicians ever mentioned the horror she endured. Worse yet, no politician in the Netherlands ever mentions the 50 to 80 Dutch children that die every year at the hands of their abusing and neglecting parents. In addition, we can only speculate how many Dutch children suffer from child (sexual) abuse and neglect. No statistics are available as there are no reporting laws. Sadly, maltreating parents are often shown more respect than their maltreated children.

Child (sexual) abuse and neglect, or more broadly violence against children, is not a political topic in the Netherlands. Although some research has been conducted, and some is ongoing, most Universities are not really interested in this topic. University courses for doctors and psychologists show an enormous lack of interest in the handling and diagnosis of child (sexual) abuse and neglect (Goedbloed & Kops, 1994; Lamers-Winkelmann, 1999). Even social workers who are working for the Child Care and Protection Board hardly receive any specialized training in child abuse, neglect, and child sexual abuse detection, intervention, and treatment.

In general, the Netherlands is a wealthy, well-ordered, tolerant, and family-oriented country; the population is well educated, and the nation has one of the highest standards of health care, the lowest number of teenage pregnancies, and the lowest number of infant mortalities at childbirth in the world. Even so, society is not interested in child abuse and neglect, and especially not in child sexual abuse. If a country with so many advantages refuses to acknowledge and tackle these issues, how can we expect poorer countries, with a less educated population and fewer available resources, to pay attention to child sexual abuse,

child prostitution, and other forms of sexual exploitation of children? If even in wealthy and well educated countries the rights of the child against sexual abuse and exploitation are not recognized and respected, how can we expect poorer countries in which a high proportion of the population cannot read or write, to confront the problem of child sexual abuse?

### ***FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE***

Many factors contribute to the sexual abuse of young children. Some of these are universal, while others are embedded in the historic and socio-cultural context of a country.

#### ***Poverty***

One important contributing factor is poverty. If the majority of a population is living in poverty, professionals focus on the basic needs of children. Survival of the children will be their main focus, with food, shelter, and education as their first priorities. Since this remains an enormous task in many countries, there will unfortunately be a lack of attention with regard to other problems that children encounter (see Segal, 1996).

Several poverty related factors contribute to the sexual abuse and exploitation of children, including abandonment, migration from rural areas into towns, and migration from male workers to industrial areas. Abandoned children are required to earn money for food and shelter, and as such, they are easy targets for sexual exploiters. In addition, impoverished economic conditions in rural areas often result in migration into towns. However, the circumstances of rural families in towns are not necessarily better than those in rural areas. On top of that, the traditional social safety net of the rural area/family disappears. When male workers migrate to huge industrial areas, the demand for cheap prostitutes enlarges, a demand that can be filled in by children.

The 'poverty hypothesis' as a contributing factor for child sexual abuse and exploitation seems to be affirmed in the research of De Silva, Jayawardena, Rajeendrajith, and Gunarathna (1997). Students with a lower economy class background reported significantly more sexual abuse histories than students from a middle economy class background. However, in the same study, the researchers also found a high proportion of students from high economy class background reporting child-

hood sexual abuse. Although they could not interpret the significance of the high incidence in the high economy class due to the small sample size, this phenomenon raises an important question: Why would children from middle economy classes be more protected against sexual abuse than those of lower *and* higher economy classes?

*The Vulnerability of Low Economy Class Children.* In very poor families, every family member has to work for food and shelter, even at a young age. Children are working as houseboys, cooks, or cleaning persons for wealthy families, hotels, and tourist resorts. Many children, after running away from domestic employment, reported being sexually abused by their employer (De Silva et al., 1997).

In addition, if no jobs are available and hunger strikes, the child, and the parents of the child, are an easy target for those who try to lure the child into the prostitution industry. As de Zoysa (this issue) points out, Sri Lanka has been a prime tourist resort for foreign pedophiles (Bond, 1980). However, the nation has attracted not only pedophiles; the (relatively) high wealth of people in the western world contributes to foreign travelling to exotic locations, such as Sri Lanka. With growing tourism in those exotic, and often poor, countries, the need for (child) prostitutes likewise grows. Next to the pedophile, who looks for sex with young children everywhere, other tourists also take advantage. Take, for example, the 'situational abuser,' who just wants to try sex once with a child and thinks that it is better to do so in an underdeveloped country than in his/her own country. Many individuals who are afraid to visit a sex club and/or a brothel at home are less afraid to do so in a foreign country. If they engage in prostitution with a minor, they can rationalize their behavior by saying that in 'those' cultures people view sex with children in a completely different manner than in their country of origin. Others rationalize their behavior by convincing themselves that the money the child has gained helps the child's family (van Benthem, van den Borne, & Noten, 2002).

*Children of Other Economy Classes.* In high economy class families, from a young age children are often more in the care of hired personnel than are children in less fortunate families. Their parents may be away from home more often than in other families, and the risk of sexual abuse by non-family members can be heightened. However, being neither poor nor rich does not explain why students from middle economy background families report less sexual abuse than other economy class students. Much more in-depth studies are necessary to gain more insight into this phenomenon.

### **Knowledge**

The De Silva et al. (1997) study pointed to another factor that contributes to the reporting of child sexual abuse. The incidence of childhood sexual abuse among students who filled in a questionnaire after hearing a lecture on child abuse was higher than in a group of students who did not attend that lecture. Eighteen percent of the males in the 'no lecture group' compared to 21% of males who attended the lecture reported childhood sexual abuse. For females, the percentages nearly doubled, from 6% in the 'no lecture' group to 11% in the lecture group. These data underline the importance of knowledge and openness. While we can only guess what the content of the lecture was, it seems that attending a lecture on child abuse raised the potential for students to recognize what happened to them and helped them to acknowledge and label it as abuse. Moreover, while 6% of the male students of the 'no lecture group' reported past or current abuse of children, 12% did so in the lecture group. Thus, knowledge may also help the perpetrator label their behavior as abusive.

Knowledge and openness are important not only for victims and perpetrators; professionals and the general public could also benefit from education. Lack of concern about the common occurrence of sexual activity between adults and children is also due to a general lack of knowledge about the phenomenon, the immediate and the long-term effects of sexual abuse on children, families, and society as a whole, and the economic costs. While reliable, official statistics on the type, prevalence, and incidence of child sexual abuse could help to counter trivialization and downplaying, many Western and Eastern European countries do not have reliable, official statistics on child (sexual) abuse. For example, in the Netherlands, there is no registration system, and data derived from a retrospective study (Draijer, 1990) are regularly trivialized and deemed insignificant both by the media and professionals. Child protection agencies do not identify child sexual abuse as a significant feature of their protection cases, and child sexual abuse cases are registered as 'family problems' (Lamers-Winkelmann, 1996; van Montfoort, 1993). Likewise in Serbia, child sexual abuse continues to be treated as a problem of certain individuals or families, instead of a problem of the community. Sexual abuse of children therefore remains underreported, underestimated, and as such, invisible (Popadic, 2001).

In 1999, an audit of the European Forum for Child Welfare (EFCW), with contributions from 15 experts in each European Union (EU) Member State, showed that violence to children, and especially sexual vio-



lence to children, to a large degree remains a hidden and unmeasured problem in many EU states. Although most EU countries do have some statistics from the judicial, police, or health authorities, these only reflect the reported, prosecuted, and/or convicted cases of child (sexual) abuse. "The general problem for all countries is that there is no systematic collection and analysis of the statistics conducted by the different bodies. It appears that in Greece, there are no official statistics at all" (EFCW, 1999, p. 114). As in Sri Lanka, many European and Eastern European countries are without any data on prevalence rates of child (sexual) abuse (World Health Organization (WHO), 1999). The 1999 WHO meeting in Padua, Italy also concluded that it was essential to collect data (in Europe) from as many sectors and sources as possible.

Reliable, empirically well founded studies on the effects of child sexual abuse can help professionals, politicians, and the public in general to recognize the impact of sexual abuse on the development of children, as well as the effects on their physical and mental health and future well-being. However, since politicians seem to be more concerned with costs than with children, studies like those published by Franey, Geffner, and Falconer (2001) are necessary to raise awareness about the enormous costs of childhood sexual abuse. Sadly, an economic analysis of the costs of (sexual) violence to children often has more impact than the presentation of incidence or prevalence figures.

Article 19, paragraph 2 of the Convention on the Right of the Child (CRC, 1989) requires EU Member States to establish appropriate social, health, and educational measures for the prevention of violence and exploitation, the treatment of victims, and, in particular, the provision of appropriate support to children and families. In accordance with this paragraph, all those working with children must have basic knowledge about child sexual abuse and the effects of sexual abuse on children. Specialists must be trained and multidisciplinary teams established. University and vocational training courses need to involve curricula on child abuse and neglect. Also in accordance to the CRC, children must be educated about their own (international) rights. It is equally important that adults are educated about children's rights because, even if children know their rights, it is fairly impossible for a child to fight for them. Thus, they need the help of adults to exercise and protect their rights. Finally, governments need to 'model' for their inhabitants. If a government does not clearly support the Rights of the Child, and only pays 'lip-service' when signing the Declaration, they cannot expect their citizens to do otherwise. For example, in a recent report of the Incest Trauma Center in Belgrade (Yugoslavia, Serbia), it was stated that:



‘The rights of the child takes one of the lowest spots on the scale of the human rights in Serbia’ (Popadic, 2001, p. 2), despite the fact that Serbia also signed the declaration.

**A FAIRY TALE TURNED REALITY:  
THE SRI LANKAN  
NATIONAL CHILD PROTECTION AUTHORITY (NCPA)**

Imagine a country in which a group of people, working in the field of child (sexual) abuse, report directly to the president of that country. Imagine the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Belgium, the USA, or any other so called civilized country, being directly involved in the problem of child (sexual) abuse. Imagine a NCPA that is multidisciplinary in the true sense of the word. And imagine this NCPA having a mandate that includes an impressive range of objectives and duties. Does it not look like a fairy tale?

In Sri Lanka, this fairy tale has become reality. Despite many obstacles, like poverty, sex tourism/industry, lack of knowledge and education, and a shortage of professionals, a group of dedicated people succeeded in interesting the president of their country in the problem of child (sexual) abuse. Child (sexual) abuse no longer is merely a ‘family problem,’ hidden behind closed doors, but an officially recognized social problem. Officially recognized by the highest authority in the country!

Nevertheless, people in fairy tale-turned-reality situations will encounter many difficulties. Coordination of services is, and will continue to be, difficult in Sri Lanka. It is likewise a major problem in many European countries. The WHO meeting in Padua stated that ‘a multidisciplinary approach required a ‘top-down’ policy, with team work at all levels, from the government authorities to the case management professionals’ (WHO, 1999, p. 7; also see Cerezo, McGrath, & Lamers-Winkelmann, 1999; Wattam et al., 1997).

Another difficulty faced by many nations involves the legal system. The Sri Lankan legal system is not ready to handle child (sexual) abuse cases. However, the same complaint can be heard in Ireland, Spain, and the Netherlands (Cerezo et al., 1999). In addition, in the Ukraine only rape is considered to be a sexual crime, whereas unwanted touching and exposure to sexual interaction is not classified as sexual abuse (WHO, 1999). And just like in Sri Lanka, child psychologists, child psychiatrists, paediatricians, and other professionals in European countries are

not particularly keen on providing assessment reports on child abuse. Regardless of the country and judicial system, providing assessment reports and testifying in court is extremely time consuming for professionals. One of the conclusions of the Irish seminar on 'legal obstacles that prevent the protection and rehabilitation of sexually abused victims' (Dublin, 1999, June) was that many professionals do not wish to put themselves on the line because they fear legal suits, such as libel. Seminars in Valencia (1999, May) and Amsterdam (1999, April) led to the same conclusion (Lamers-Winkelmann, 1999).

Allegations of child sexual abuse often require medical evidence if claims are to be substantiated. However, in Sri Lanka there are too few forensic pathologists. In the Netherlands, medical examination of (alleged) sexual abuse victims is rare; in addition, even when a child is examined by a medical doctor, most physicians do not follow a protocol to ensure the preservation of possible evidence. Moreover, many of them do not know how to do such an examination (Goedbloed & Kops, 1994). For many nations, adequate training of medical personnel must be a goal if cases of child sexual abuse are to be properly documented and prosecuted.

Although the conditions in residential homes are much better in most European countries than are those described by the author, placing a child in a residential home often is more impossible than possible in the Netherlands. There is simply not enough space in residential facilities. Staff-to-child ratios are much better in the Netherlands than in Sri Lanka, but due to laws that restrict working time, staff rotate several times a day and children are not able to form meaningful relationships with their mentor or group leader. Other factors that cause difficulties include the fact that the mean age of staff in residential facilities is low, staff are underpaid for the work that is required of them, and 'absence through illness' is high. The appalling circumstances in Romanian residential facilities have been world news, and for many Russian children residential facilities are not available at all. The social and economic chaos after the breaking up of the communistic structure has led to many children living in the streets. It seems that many countries, either poor or rich, do not have enough residential facilities for children without a caring family. In wealthier countries, children often are obliged to stay in a dysfunctional family for too long. Although the circumstances in residential homes in wealthy nations are far better than are those in the poorer countries, they all share the problem of too few, and underpaid, staff.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, child trafficking for sexual purposes from Eastern and Central Europe and the Baltic States, mostly to Western Europe, has grown. Children from Bulgaria, Moldavia, Romania, Russia, Albania, and the Ukraine are taken away or bought from their parents and sent to Western Europe, either for illegal adoption or child prostitution. In particular, the number of boys from these regions who are in prostitution in Western Europe is growing. For example, an investigation of the Rotterdam Police (the Netherlands, 1994-1995) showed that many boys working in brothels for men were recruited in Poland.

In Sri Lanka, sexually abused children often are stigmatized. While (many) European countries seem to be more tolerant, open, and victim-oriented, sexual abuse victims are often stigmatized here as well. Parents of young sexual abuse victims complain that their children are not allowed to play with their friends when the abuse is revealed. In a high profile case in Bolsward (in the northern Netherlands), the child victims were scolded in the street and at school to such an extent that it became nearly impossible for the family to live in their hometown. In addition, many older girls are still held partly responsible for the abuse because they are presumed to have been seductive, and thus deserving of abuse. Especially girls from Muslim families (there has been a huge influx from Muslim countries in the Netherlands in the last years) will be stigmatized, forced to marry the perpetrator, or sent back to their country of origin.

### CONCLUSION

Sri Lanka has made a major effort to combat child (sexual) abuse. The firm commitment to child protection, and the establishment of the NCPA is an example for many European countries. The mandate of the NCPA includes a broad range of objectives and duties. The NCPA reports directly to the president of Sri Lanka, and as such, is not obliged to fight ministerial bodies. Also the board seems to be truly multidisciplinary. Taken together, this can make a major difference in the lives of many children.

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